Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture 01

Introducing Performance and its Characteristics in the South Asian Context II

Good morning students. Welcome back to the lecture series on performative gender and religions in South Asia. We are discussing our first module titled introducing performance and its characteristics in the South Asian context. We have been trying to foreground or lay the basis or the rationale of this course in our first lecture. I was talking about the importance of performance in the South Asian context and we have started talking about Indian narratology. So as a continuation from our previous discussion, we were talking about K. Ayyappa Paniker's understanding of the different important features or different important characteristics that define Indian narratology. So drawing from our previous discussion and continuing on that, the next prominent feature that we find in Indian narratology is called fantasization. So the Indian mind from the beginning of history, from the very early parts of history has continued to question the nature of reality.

It has often found delight in transforming the apparent and obvious reality into invisible or intangible legends and myths. So rather than only harping on or drawing on the rational and the sensory, what can be grasped by the senses, the Indian mind has drawn its creative influence or an inspiration from imagination, from legends, from myths. So that is where fantasy comes to play a very important role. Fantasy is a way of accommodating even the unpleasant reality that we experience sensorily in the outside world in a way that suits the heart's content of the author or reader. So we deal with the reality, when the reality becomes unbearable or significantly remarkably unpleasant, we recourse to fantasy, we recourse to legends and myths.

So we make a mishmash of reality with imagination or with make-believe. Fantasization is therefore a privileged enterprise in the Indian narrative. The Vedas, the Puranas, the Epics, the Fairy tale and the Folk tale are all primarily perceptions of the imagination, and only secondarily do we find that they are incumbent on the rational mind, they

depend on the rational mind. The main emphasis or onus is on imagination. So the all-powerful influence of myth in the narrative art of India, in the narrative technique of India is to be explained in terms of the shared assumptions of the people, who always showed an inclination, a propensity to understand the nature and natural episodes and phenomena and every aspect of this vast universe in terms of, you know, synthesized imagination or a comprehensive mythical framework, where fantasy and not logic reigns supreme.

So in order to grasp the natural phenomena, the cosmic events, the Indian, you know, thoughts have recoursed greatly to fantasy, to imagination, right, and not directly to logic always. So its direct impact on narratology can be seen in every kind of narration in India. It could be the classical renditions, the folk renditions, the ancient, medieval, modern, you know, period arts and artistic endeavors, the epics and mahakavyas, the paintings, music, dance, drama and instruments. So fantasy or imagination, the creative force is at the heart of all of it and plays a momentous role. Next trait in terms of discussing, you know, Indian narratology would be cyclicalization.

Cyclicalization is a common feature of many Indian narrators. When we talk of cyclicalization, Jatak comes to mind. Jatak is a Pali text of the Buddhist tradition. It is talking about the stories of Buddha's different births, and it is perhaps the most crucial or the greatest example depicting the cyclic pattern. This could be an aspect of religious belief or philosophical context for the Indian narrator.

It has become a device for concatenating or stringing together a number of tales in a particular narrative formula, right? One of the most prominent formula in this regard is incarnation and reincarnation, you know, the different births of Buddha that we see in Jatak. And then also the question of Dharma comes in. Dharma and Karma, whatever actions you are doing in your previous birth will be balanced out in the subsequent births and till you become an elevated being and you are liberated from the cycle of birth and death, you have to keep taking, you know, you have to keep coming back in different living forms on the surface of the earth. That is the concept that informs Jataka. So, observing the cycle of day and night and even the perpetual cyclical motion of the seasons, the circular revolutions and rotations of the heavenly forms, the storytellers from India have assumed that all tales are cyclic in nature, right? And this emulates the cosmic, you know, reality or the cosmic existence.

This is similar to the living organisms that recycle themselves perpetually in the natural world. So, in the Indian narratology, there is no unilinearity. It is a very, you know, Greco-Roman, it is a very Western concept, where in death there is decadence, there is no longer hope, everything ends with death. Here death means procrastination, it just means a difference of culmination by a few more lives after several births or, you know, realization of certain goals will take place. The Indian storytellers notice that birth, growth and death form the order, the principle order of life and therefore, the story of God's incarnations and reoccurrence of the demonic forces follow a cyclic waning and waxing pattern.

We see this in so many of the Puranas and myths that whenever a particular demon has, you know, reached the apex, the zenith of all sins and harmful detrimental activities, who has become the seer of the worst order or the highest order, an incarnation of Vishnu or Shakti is born. So whenever a demon is wreaking too much of damage to the society, as a way of cleansing the society of this kind of sin, God is born. So there is a kind of waning and waxing. We see that initially such a demon would be generally or commonly a human with very ordinary characteristics, and just with a boon of one of the Gods such as Brahma, they would become suddenly too overconfident, too haughty and they would start wreaking, you know, damage to the society, harming the society at large and that is when Vishnu has to take the form of an avatar, right? So the concept of avatar greatly influences Indian narratology. So the next characteristic we talk about is allegorization.

Allegorization is a kind of an inclination in the Indian context for abstraction rather than representing something concretely, in order to achieve a broader effect or relevance, right? So when we talk very literally, the effect is limited but when we talk in terms of allegories the effect is broader and the relevance, you know, the relevance transcends the literal level and goes on to form layers of meaning. So it is perhaps a universal trait, not just, you know, limited to the Indian tradition, where allegories we see are being used by specific varieties of, you know, Chinese and European literary and artistic forms too. Allegories are common to other cultures as well. So this universality of allegorization as a technique and a characteristic has led to the popularity of the Indian text, an old Indian text called Panchatantra across the world. Panchatantra has influenced other, you know, folklorist traditions, other folklorist cultures from other different parts of the world to invest inanimate objects as well as the non-human creatures with the capacity to feel, think and even speak.

So in all these parables, fables from, you know, deeply drawing on Panchatantra we see the speaking animals as a stock figure or a common motive coming back again and again. And this concept of thinking non-human creatures, speaking animals are deeply influenced and they stem from the animistic or atavistic beliefs of early or ancient India, right? The animistic or atavistic beliefs of early times. So the fact that moral ideas could be more effectively presented in terms of the activities of the animals is something that operates at the root of most of these animal fables, right? Through these animals we are actually talking about different, you know, features, different traits, different characteristics. And Indian narrators have deployed the potential of the animal fable for intellectual and moral communication, for edification, for teaching the society, teaching certain values to the society, right? The use of the frame story, the practice of emboxing the stories, the emphasis on moral values, the introduction of tale within tale which, you know, which renders a very complex narratology actually, then the element of soft satire, and finally the lively presentation of animal characters are some of the very important and basic features that define allegorization in Panchatantra. Next, we are going to talk about anonymization.

So I was talking about the absence of the concept of copyright in the case of Mahakavyas, right? So, Apauruseya, Apauruseya meaning not a personal or meaning universal and collective is something that applies to the authorial identity, especially as far as the texts from ancient India are concerned. It is a concept that seems to encompass a number of Indian narratives whose origins are lost in antiquity. A certain anonymity has been maintained by many of the storytellers, even when they lived in historical times. So many of these authors actually appear as mytho-historical figures, where we do not know if there was just one Valmiki or one Ved Vyasa or these are generic names for a collective, you know, authors. So a number of authors that may have written these great epics or Mahakavirs for, you know, generations for centuries.

So there is no specific authorial claim associated with such great texts. They are like a great work of quilt being stitched by too many people from different ends. So, it points to a pluralistic development of an artwork. So the objective of anonymization was to merge the subjective self of the narrator in the collective readership. The narrator is not above the readership.

The narrator is not an I. The concept of individual I is a very western concept. In India, we have a community-centric identification and identity, where I is never above we, right? So no one person can claim authorial, you know, copyright over Ramayana and

Mahabharata. Over generations, over, you know, centuries these works have been written by multiple authors. What happens is that the narrator and the audience are one and the same.

One who listens a story at one point is also writing it at another point. When we listen, because these epics have existed in oral traditions, right? They have thrived down generations through memorialization and reproduction from memory, right? So, someone tells me a story, I imbibe, and then I reproduce in another milieu to another audience. So, I become a re-writer of the story. In the course of narrating again and again, we add and subtract, right? So, the point behind attributing the authorship of a work to fictitious names, such as Brahma the creator, right, Valmiki the anthill-born or Vyasa the diameter or extension, these names itself are loaded with infinite associations such that no author is just an individual, like I was saying, especially when he uses language which is an instrument of collective expression. That is what a Mahakavya basically is.

When we discuss Mahakavya in greater detail, we are going to see how it is actually documentation of history before such a concept of, you know, recording the past even emerged in the West. It happened much before the Western concept of history. So, the past is something that informs and forms the bedrock of a Mahakavya. So, every reader takes what he can or what he wants from a given text. The texts are usually open-ended.

They cannot therefore be in the Indian context any such thing as a definitive edition or a definitive interpretation, which we see more in the case of Western texts, right, where the fluidity is arrested somewhat. Here even in the works that are considered as religious works, the Upanishads, the Puranic texts, they are by virtue of their esoteric nature, the meanings are obscure and they are open to multiple interpretations, right. Oral transmission across the ages causes not only erosion but also conversely it causes accretion, accumulation and even appending of what the purists might consider as outside material, right. So, there is no such consideration of inside and outside of a text. Meanings accrue, contexts accrue and appendages, new appendages form. So, a purist would consider such, you know, accretions as willful, as capricious and even careless, you know, changes being made to the original text.

But this concept of original text as a concrete and concrete form and an end in itself is highly problematic in the Indian context. For example, if we look at Srimad Bhagavad Gita, Srimad Bhagavad Gita was a much later addition, you know, appendage to the Mahabharata. Next, we are going to talk about elasticization of time. So, narrative flexibility is most likely connected with the fluidity of the time within the narrative frame. Narrative time in Indian texts is more psychological in character rather than logical.

So, this is one of the major differences between the western fictions that we see, especially in the 19th century, the modern western fictions and the traditional Indian narratives. So, time is not a historical time, time is not measured in scientific, through scientific methods, it is not a calendrical time or a clock time here in the Indian context. One may be able to date the writing of a given work perhaps with some certainty. However, the fictitious events narrated may not be tied to a specific time period so easily. So, as in the Indian Puranas, there is sometimes a deliberate attempt on the part of the narrator to leave the time and the happenings as undefined.

We do not tie the events to the time so, you know, rigidly and specifically, thereby shifting the emphasis from a definite deadline to indefinite infinity. Many years have passed since, when we say that, we do not know how many years have passed, by 'many'.. so the engagement of the imagination of the reader, how much is 'many' for me may be different for another reader. So, a lot of things are open-ended and abstract. Since the narrative consists of a sequence of events, the duration is of significance, but not perhaps a historical placement of this duration. So, do not, we do not know how many months for sure.. between which months this event took place.

It is always roughly a temporal phase, never concretely. In the Indian narrative, time is measured in cosmic terms, right? The different phases of moon, the different cycle of seasons rather than six months or two months, right? So, the ages or eons measured through the movements of the planets and through the stars rather than the western concept of calendrical time or standard physical units or measuring, you know, units of time is something that informs Indian narratology. So we understand time as season. Many seasons have passed since Shakuntala last met King Dushyanta or since Sita met Rama.

So many seasons have passed. We do not really know whether it was January or February because, so there is a psychic measurement of time or understanding of time rather than the scientific units or the calendrical time, which is more of western concept. Next we talk of spatialization. Space itself is of great importance in ancient narratives. The narrative formula of opening of a tale is more specific and it pertains to the space, which leaves the exact time imprecise, right? So the stage actor in Kudiyattam, this is an example I am giving. In Kudiyattam, a traditional presentation of Sanskrit drama in Kerala, the stage actor begins his solo narration with a reference to an indefinite past, right? But the spatial reference is far more concretized, far more detailed and specific.

The Indian narrative can therefore be said as more harping or more pinned down to space. It is a spatial one. This makes for a more free handling of the time factor. Since time is not given in terms of years or months or decades, it is indefinite, time remains open-ended and a more flexible factor. So since the time or temporality is not bounded, since the narrator is not constrained by temporal factors, he can concentrate on the spatial movements as a way of indicating shifts in location.

So what is Ramayana? The title of Ramayana is Journey of Rama. So the description that we find in the course of Rama's journey to the forests is more spatial. It pertains to the forests, the different places, the different cities that he is, you know, passing through; the little myths, the local myths and the Upakhyans associated and the smaller events happening in these different cities and different places. He passes through different ashramas and in the course, we don't know how much of time has elapsed.

A lot of time has elapsed. This is how we get to know. The only, you know, physically bound time that we know, which is specified is 14 years of exile, but not everything or every aspect of his journey is detailed temporally or defined or marked temporally. So the spatial dimension becomes more crucial in the unfolding of the plot rather than time. In the same way in Silapathikaram, we see that, we see Kovalan and Kannaki, the protagonists, moving through the forests and going to the city of Madurai and we don't know how much time has elapsed. We just get to know about the description of the nature.

The beauty of the nature is described through so many, you know, stylistic, you know, traits or stylistic devices. The beauty of nature is described through stylistic devices used

by the poet. So once again in the end, we get to know for once that Kannaki, after the death of Kovalan, was lamenting, sitting under a tree and only she lived for, you know, a counted number of days, maybe 13 or 14 days before the heavenly sprites and angels took her away. She left her, you know, ephemeral form and she became a celestial being.

The gods took her away. So for 13 or 14 days, she sits under a tree and sheds her tear at her husband being wrongly killed by the king. So the temporal dimension is often underplayed. The temporal, you know, description remains undefined. That's all I'm trying to get at through all these examples;

Whereas the space factors becomes more graphic. The description of nature is an integral part of any epic, epic romance, any Katha, any Akhyayika and so forth. So stylization imposes limits on the writer or storyteller, whereas improvisation acts as a liberating factor. So here we are going to read these two last traits that I am going to discuss today vis-a-vis Indian narratology - stylization and improvisation in juxtaposition with one another. They actually have two very opposing, very opposite tendencies.

So stylization is a way of imposing stringent rules on an artwork and improvisation means spontaneity, off the cuff, impromptu. It acts as a liberating factor. It renders or endows flexibility to a writing. So the contrary device that the two are, the contrary device of improvisation is a means of going beyond the limitations imposed by the code of stylization. So improvisation helps to provide elements of surprise just as, you know, doing anything spontaneously, off the cuff.

It has an element of surprise at the heart of it. That is its purpose. Stylization, on the contrary, is disciplining of this entire narrative. You cannot do anything off the cuff, whereas improvisation pertains to freedom, artistic freedom. So these twin features of the Indian narrative art are to be found in any typical Indian classical theatre. The Indian narrative seems to maintain and even balance between these two - improvisation and stylization - giving some liberties and then tying down, right? Two opposing tendencies are in tandem in any typical, you know, classical theatre or artform.

Divergence within a given text is accommodated through the variations that are the result of various degrees of stylization and improvisation simultaneously taking place. Any

stylized version of Ramayana, for instance, will present intricate details. So that is the function of stylization.   Detailing in very disciplined manner with metaphors, with similes, with all the grammatical ornamentations, so that is, these are the poetic devices, this is where the literary richness, you know, comes from, emerges from; whereas the extensions of meanings, the freedom of imagination and the insertion of additional episodes are possible through the presence of, through the evidences of improvisation.

I am going to stop my lecture here today and let us meet again with another round of discussions in another lecture. Thank you.